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AUTHOR Ebert, Constance C.
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ABSTRACT

This paper based on one dropout prevention specialist's experience in working with at-risk students, discusses the need for comprehensive and collaborative efforts to meet the special problems of these children. Various national and state statistics underscore the growing cost to society for the failure to fully educate those students who are at risk of dropping out. The Regional Education Service Agency in North Central West Virginia conducts a Dropout Prevention Program, which serves many underachievers who have already established a pattern of failure and low expectations. These students often live in poverty and face various family problems. Merely providing students with information on risk-taking behaviors appears to have little effect on their behavior. However, some successes are seen when students begin to see that the dropout prevention specialist cares about them, and they begin to care about what the specialist is trying to teach them. Through increased federal support of programs for at-risk youth, the schools and communities can and must meet the total needs of disadvantaged children. Efforts must be comprehensive in nature, providing preschool programs for all disadvantaged children, transitional first grade classes, non-graded elementary schools, middle schools structured around interdisciplinary teaching teams, and alternative learning programs for unsuccessful high school students. Ending the cycle of poverty and dependency will take collaborative efforts linking schools and the community to form a network of support. (KS)

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The Importance Of Dropout Prevention And Education In Breaking The Cycle of Poverty

Constance C. Ebert
Dropout Prevention
Specialist

RESA VII
1000 Virginia Ave.
Fairmont, WV 26554

RESA VII is a Regional Education Service Agency serving twelve counties in North Central West Virginia. Our dropout prevention efforts began in 1985 through a Job Training Partnership Act Grant funded through the Department of Labor and administered by the West Virginia Department of Education, Bureau of Vocational, Technical, and Adult Education. The Department of Labor became involved with dropout prevention because of the need expressed by business and labor leaders for a more qualified workforce. Projections are that by the year 2000 new jobs will require a workforce with a median educational level of 13.5 years.(1) As our nation's economy has shifted from an industry based system to a technology-driven system, most young people who drop out of school today are not prepared to enter the workforce.

Until the 1950's, less than half of our students graduated from high school. However, those who quit school could find work in our coal mines, steel mills and factories; or they could help run the family farm.(2) Young women were expected to get married and stay at home. Many young girls still cite marriage and homemaking as their career goal. When they think in terms of jobs, they usually think only of supplementing the family income. During the 1960's through increased emphasis upon graduating from high school, the graduation rate rose to about 75% and has remained fairly constant at that level for the past 25 years.(1)

In the decade of the 1980's, numerous reports and studies have underscored the growing cost to society for the failure to fully educate those students who usually sit in the back rows of our classrooms. Each year, nearly a million of them drop out of school, and an additional 700,000 who do receive diplomas are as deficient in meaningful skills and work habits as are most dropouts. This failure to educate nearly a third of our students has become a real expense to both our society as a whole as well as to the individual lives of those young people. Each year's class of dropouts costs our nation more than $240 billion in lost earnings and tax revenue over their lifetimes.(2) Attracted to what appears to be the "easy" money of the streets, many dropouts become involved with drugs and crime. Four out of five dropouts have drug-related problems and they are four times as likely to commit crimes.(3) A 1972 report by "The Association of State Correctional Administrators" determined that 85% of inmates in the average state prison were high school dropouts. Female dropouts on the other hand are nine times as likely to be on welfare than girls who graduate.(3) And 20% of those girls who drop out do so because of pregnancy.(4) During 1989, the federal government spent more than $21.5 billion on welfare programs serving families started by teenagers.(5) The children of teen parents are four times more likely to be poor, to stay poor, and

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to do poorly in school.(4)

The "Children's Defense Fund" reports that 20.9% of children under 18 in this country are poor. According to that same report, 30.4% of children in West Virginia are considered poor.(6) Alienated from the mainstream of society and caught up in a cycle of poverty, these children are becoming part of America's growing "underclass", often characterized by a low sense of self-esteem and lack of motivation. These self-defeating attitudes appear to become inbred as a result of a lifestyle which teaches them to be dependent. We all know of persons born into poverty who have a determination to succeed in spite of their disadvantages. Unfortunately, there is a high correlation between poverty and school failure, especially when the family structure has broken down. We find that children of poverty are three times more likely to drop out than children from more economically advantaged homes, and they are more likely to be attending schools of lesser quality than children who live in affluent neighborhoods.(2)

Since the 1983 publication of A Nation At Risk, most states have strengthened high school graduation requirements and raised educational standards, but only a few have provided additional remediation and counseling services to help disadvantaged students meet the higher standards. Terrel H. Bell, the Secretary of Education under whose admininstration A Nation At Risk was written, has observed that the school reform movement is benefiting 70% of the students while we still are not effectively educating the other 30%.(1)

Most school systems do a commendable job educating the majority of youth today. West Virginia University requires all incoming freshman to take a written math placement test. The results of this test have demonstrated that the schools of West Virginia are preparing many of our top students to meet the demands of the 21st century. Through the efforts of dedicated teachers, our West Virginia high schools are graduating students capable of completing calculus and other higher level math courses as college freshman. Given the resources and conditions under which our teachers work, many of them do a job which is only one step short of miraculous! I certainly do not want to fault these fine teachers when I say that I must also agree with Dr. Bell's observation that we are not effectively educating the bottom 30% of our young people. Many of these students are "able" learners often referred to as being underachievers.

Some of the underachievers I've worked with in our RESA VII Dropout Prevention Program included two teenage sisters eager to cooperate with me because they wanted to improve their grades and be able to graduate. Although they were reading below grade level, neither had been identified as learning disabled or handicapped. One of the girls showed some promising artistic ability - yet today, both girls are high school dropouts. I feel that the intervention efforts were too little and too late for these girls. By the time many students are referred to our program, the pattern of failure and low expectations has already been established; however, this is only part of the problem. There were multiple risk factors at work to keep these two

sisters in the poverty cycle. They were children of an alcoholic father and a poorly educated mother. Although the mother spoke with me of her desire for her daughters to graduate from high school, the atmosphere of the home was not conducive to academic success. But there is yet another factor in this story of wasted human potential - these girls simply didn't fit into the social structure of the school. Quite often this sense of alienation from one's peers is the deciding factor in dropping out of school. The girls' family couldn't afford to buy the "right" kind of clothing. Many of our students work in the Governor's Summer Youth Enhancement Program where they are paid to attend classes in the morning and work in the community during the afternoon. Quite a few of them use the money they earn to buy their school clothes, but these girls had to give their paychecks to their mother. She needed the money to pay bills and to have the water turned on again in their house.

Another fourteen year old referred to me was failing several classes as a result of her increasing absenteeism. I learned through talking with her privately that she was ashamed to come to school because of her clothing. Her family had previously been doing well, but some financial difficulties coupled with her growth spurt had forced her into wearing the hand-me-down clothing of her older sister. I convinced her to enroll in our program in order to help her get caught up so she could pass her 8th grade classes and go on to high school. The first day she was in my class, she began crying and asked to go to the office. Later she told me that she didn't belong there because she wasn't one of those kind of people. Although she wanted my help, she didn't want to be categorized with the "losers" in the school.

Some of the students who have been in our program include students like Joe who dropped out to stay with his mother who had cancer, and Lori who stayed home to try to protect her mother from being beaten by her father. Bill, on the other hand, hated to go home. He said it was like living in the middle of a battlefield. Dot lived with her father and couldn't understand why her mother, who had remarried, didn't want to have anything to do with her! And then there was Tom, whose body odor got so bad during cold weather that no one could stand to be within five feet of him. One day I took him aside and asked if he had hot water in his house for bathing. "Well, of course we do," he answered indignantly, "all we have to do is boil it on the stove!" I quickly learned never to act dismayed by anything these students told me. But the most difficult situations involved sexual abuse. One girl who had been abused by her father had great difficulty expressing any feelings other than anger. She came up to me one day and handed me an issue of Time magazine which she had gotten from the reading shelf. She didn't say a word. She just pointed to the title of the article. My heart ached for her as I read the words, "Home Is Where The Hurt Is."(7)

Never before in any other teaching assignment had I gotten close enough to my students that I could feel so much empathy for them. Was it any wonder that these children were failing academically? Researchers in brain-based approaches to learning

tell us that stress and threat affect the brain and that anything which affects our physiological functioning also affects our capacity to learn.(8) Realizing this, I searched for filmstrips and videos dealing with stress management. Then we talked about identifying the stressors in our lives and what to do to be able to cope with them. I called the local domestic violence shelter and arranged for a speaker to come in and pass out literature. She also discussed characteristics of abusive personalities warning the students not to go out with anyone having signs of those behaviors. The school psychologist came in and discussed how to recognize signs of depression and suicidal behavior. We also had group discussions about choosing one's lifestyle and setting career goals which would help attain the type of lifestyle desired. Several boys said that they might like to become truckers, so I contacted a local independent truck driver who actually brought his truck to school for us. I watched as my students sat engrossed by this man and his candor about the difficulties of being on the road away from this family. I listened as they asked him questions about trucking regulations, costs, and weight limits. He let them climb up into his cab, and he didn't fail to mention that he wished he had applied himself more in school so that he could have gone on to college. I was pleased by my students' attentiveness and behavior, but I was also envious of how effortlessly he sustained their interest while I had to constantly urge them to stay on task when it came to completing their school assignments. These kids who are turned off by traditional textbook assignments love innovative, hands-on experiences.

I began to develop some close ties to these students. If they failed, I began to feel that I too had failed. I tried to push them and encourage them. The harder I worked, the more they tried to convince me that I expected too much out of them. One boy told me that they had been referred to me because they were the bad kids in the school, so I shouldn't be surprised when they tried to give me a hard time. Another boy told me that he wasn't the kind I'd want my daughter to go out with. The low self-esteem and low expectations of these students is a major factor in their academic problems. According to the research of Dr. William Purkey, 80% of children entering first grade feel good about themselves and like who they are, 20% of fifth graders feel good about themselves, and only 5% of eleventh graders feel good about themselves.(9)

I have to admit that during the past few years working with high risk students that I have had serious doubts about being able to change the way they perceive themselves and their abilities. I have found that I can give them information about the harmful effects of tobacco, alcohol, drugs, and sexually transmitted diseases; but they will go right on smoking, drinking, popping pills, and having sex as though nothing is going to happen to them. I sometimes wonder if these risk-taking behaviors are a type of self-destruction based upon internal feelings of hopelessness and the fear that they are not worthy of being loved. I've heard it said that young people don't care about what you know, until they know that you care. It takes time

to establish creditability with high risk youth; but when they begin to believe that you care about them, then they will begin to care about what you are trying to teach them.

No, I wasn't able to prevent all my students from dropping out of school, but I don't feel that my efforts were a total loss. My greatest reward was a thank you card from the mother of a 7th grader whose father had been in prison. She wrote, "Bobby's father and I would like to express the thanks and admiration we feel for the help and patience you've shown. It's the first spark of interest I've seen in his school work since the 3rd grade." Those words helped make everything seem worthwhile. I felt that I had achieved the goal I was after: I had wanted to rekindle the natural curiosity that all children have when they start school, and I wanted them to enjoy learning and to believe that they could succeed.

We can and we must begin to meet the total needs of the disadvantaged children in our schools. The William T. Grant Foundation Commission on Work, Family, and Citizenship has recommended that our federal government invest in at-risk youth an additional $5 billion annually over a ten year period. At present, the commitment of the federal government is sufficient to serve only one out of five low-income children in need of pre-school education, only two out of five in need of remediation, and only one out of twenty in need of job training.(1) We need to advocate federal support of programs to meet the educational needs of all at-risk youth.

On the state level, we need to see more legislatures endeavoring to follow Kentucky's example of guaranteeing minimum per-pupil spending in order to equalize educational opportunity to help close the gap between wealthy school districts and those in low income areas.(10)

I recently heard a news commentator state that the very rich top 1% of our population controls wealth, which is equal to that of the bottom 40% of our nation. We must find ways to bridge this widening gap between the haves and have nots before a permanent "underclass" of the unemployed and undereducated place additional burdens on society while new high-tech jobs go unfilled.

Educators must strive for a consensus regarding the steps to take in order to meet the needs of the whole child. Our efforts must be comprehensive in nature providing pre-school programs for all disadvantaged children, transitional first grade classes for children weak in language and concept development, non-graded elementary schools which use heterogeneous grouping and cooperative learning strategies, middle schools structured around interdisciplinary teaching teams which incorporate life skills, peer pressure reversal, self-esteem, and decision making skills into the basic skills curriculum. Students unable to succeed in traditional high schools should have the option of enrolling in an alternative learning program or a GED program.

Educators alone cannot hope to end the cycle of poverty and dependency. It will take a collaborative effort linking together the schools and the community to form a network of support that will prevent our children from falling through the cracks in the system. Communities could set up neighborhood homework and

tutoring centers along with mentorship programs that pair students with caring role models and provide a support base which could be the deciding factor in preparing our youth to succeed in school and in life.(11)

Not only do we share a common concern for the children of Appalachia, we also share a common responsibility to become advocates of an educational system which meets the needs of all children. While it may be true that many high risk children have been dealt a poor hand, let us join together to teach them how to play their hand well rather than to compare them to those who have been dealt a better hand.

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